

Article by the High Representative, Carlos Westendorp: "Don't Bargain With Bosnia"

By Carlos Westendorp

It sounds simple enough: To end the war in Yugoslavia, just arrange a territory swap. Tell Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic that in return for handing the Serbian province of Kosovo over to the resident ethnic Albanians, he will be allowed to annex a matching acreage of Republika Srpska, the Serb half of Bosnia, which Serb nationalists often claim that one day will be part of a Greater Serbia.

David Owen, the European Union's special negotiator during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is among those who have suggested this solution. On Thursday, he told the BBC that "this is a trade worthwhile in the overall interests of the Balkans." The idea is that it would kill three birds with one stone. The Kosovars would get the independence they crave; NATO would not have to continue bombing Yugoslavia; and the chances of a lasting peace in Bosnia and of extracting the 30,000 peacekeepers still stationed there would be improved if the eastern part of Republika Srpska, a stronghold for troublesome Bosnian Serb hard-liners, was to join Yugoslavia.

As appealing as this argument might sound, it is unfortunately one that is fraught with erroneous, even dangerous, assumptions. The first of these is that the Bosnian Serbs would agree to a solution that saw part of their territory handed over to Yugoslavia with the rest remaining within Bosnia. While hard-line Bosnian Serbs have in the past advocated unification with Yugoslavia, they have always meant that they would like to see the whole, not just part, of Republika Srpska join the "motherland." Furthermore, the hard-liners might be reconsidering even that stance now that Milosevic has become an international pariah and has drowned all prospects for prosperity within Yugoslavia.

A second false assumption is that once eastern Republika Srpska joined Yugoslavia, the Bosnian Croats would continue to implement the Dayton Peace Accords as if nothing had changed. Elements of the Bosnian Croat leadership would like nothing more than for the Herzegovina region of Bosnia to become a part of independent Croatia. It would be hard, perhaps impossible, for the International Community to deny this aspiration if it sanctioned the secession of eastern Republika Srpska. A carve-up of this nature would leave the Bosniaks, as the Bosnian Muslims like to be called, confined to a land-locked sliver of land with all the territorial integrity of a Gaza Strip. They wouldn't accept that. Indeed, they might even go back to war to prevent it from happening.

Bosnia is not the only country that would be affected by plans such as Lord Owen's. There are ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, ethnic Hungarians in the Vojvodina region of Yugoslavia, and Sandzak Muslims in Serbia and Montenegro. These groups will also have a case for rejoining their ethnic brethren if the West starts fiddling with borders in Bosnia. The truth is that the redrawing of borders in the Balkans is a dangerous game with consequences that no-one can predict.

Nevertheless, the idea seems to be gaining currency in some circles. In part, this is due to the frequently expressed concern that, barring some radical change of policy, NATO troops are going to have to remain in the Balkans "forever." This is simple scare-mongering. Certainly the international community will have to remain both in Bosnia and in Kosovo for a long time-perhaps even for a generation-but not forever. Furthermore, our commitment can be gradually reduced as peace takes hold, just as the numbers of foreign troops in Bosnia have been reduced as the Dayton Peace Accords have been implemented.

Meanwhile, our presence in Bosnia is making a difference. Only three years have passed since the war, but Bosnia today is a world away from the Bosnia then, as anyone who visits will testify. The country has a new currency, a new flag, a new passport and new license plates. Its citizens move freely about the country. Elections have loosened the grip of nationalist, hard-line politicians. Over 300,000 soldiers have gone back to civilian life. More than 50,000 homes have been repaired. Nearly 320,000 refugees who fled abroad have returned to their country. And perhaps most importantly, the Bosnian Serbs have responded with relative moderation to the NATO military strikes against Yugoslavia. It is true that there have been plenty of demonstrations and rhetoric, and a few acts of violence. But the message from most Bosnian Serbs has been clear: they have had enough war and don't want to sacrifice their peace for another crazed Milosevic cause.

So it is defeatist to argue, as Lord Owen does, that "Dayton has not yet worked, and many of us think it will probably not work." Admittedly, the peace is not yet self-sustaining, and it is now taking its hardest test since the Dayton Agreement was reached in 1995. But there is good reason to expect that with proper international support and guidance Bosnia can emerge even stronger than it was before the war. Bosnians have co-existed for hundreds of years, and before fighting broke out a third of all marriages in urban Bosnia were mixed. Many displaced people and refugees are keen to restore that harmony, and hope to return to their original towns and villages, regardless of which ethnic group currently controls them. Even hard-line Bosnian Serbs might now be thinking that it would be better to work with the Dayton peace process than to unify themselves with Yugoslavia. When it comes down to it, after all, Dayton provides Bosnia with a lot of money and aid for reconstruction.

The only way to achieve security for all ethnic communities in the Balkans is to push for democratic and economic reforms and to instill civic values throughout the region. That means encouraging Serbs, Moslem and Croats in Bosnia, as well as Serbs and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo to live with one another again. It means fostering the conviction that multi-ethnicity is a strength, not a weakness. More to the point, if we give up on the notion of multiethnic states, then those who perpetrate ethnic cleansing have won. That is a disastrous, morally repugnant message we cannot afford to send. As British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said last week: Ethnic cleansing "belonged to the Middle Ages, it does not belong to modern Europe." Europe's strength lies in its diversity, within states as well as between them.

The Bosnian project is both ambitious and unprecedented. We are here for the long haul, and the same will be true of Kosovo. Success will take many years and a major international commitment in terms of financial aid and ground troops. But these are the costs that must be paid after wars. We must be honest with ourselves about this. The alternative is to tinker with maps and then prematurely withdraw from the Balkans. That would lead to chronic warfare, waves of refugees, and a wider regional war that could pose a serious threat to European security. Withdrawal, in other words, would cost the international community far more in the long run.

We must now stay true to the principles which led us to become involved in the Balkans in the first place. There is no magic map, no magic geographical jig-saw which offers a neat and cost-free exit. The irony is that if any of the elected officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina had suggested Lord Owen's solution, I could have, under the powers given to me by the International Community, removed them from office for obstructing the peace process. The Balkan states are part of Europe, and membership in the European family of nations is the solution to their problems. Dismemberment is not.